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How to lose defectors

The bungling of the cases of two very different Soviet defectors leaves a raw trail of lessons — some painfully obvious — to be learned for the future.

Destroying a defector

No American can quickly erase the haunting image of Ukrainian seaman Miroslav Medvid. After twice jumping into the Mississippi to escape his Soviet grain freighter, he beat his head against the rocks as a Soviet sailor and two American shipping agents subdued him with handcuffs served up by a helpful U.S. Border Patrol agent.

Commissioner of Immigration and Nationalization Allan C. Nelson has conceded that the two Border Patrol agents who returned Mr. Medvid to his ship blundered substantially. INS regulations specify that when an East bloc national appears to be seeking political asylum an agent must immediately inform his or her superiors, who then contact the State Department.

That's how things were handled in Jacksonville, Fla., even as the Medvid drama was in progress. A Romanian seaman who defected there on Nov. 6 was granted asylum on Nov. 7, and by Nov. 8 had a job as a maintenance mechanic at a metal recycling plant.

Why Mr. Medvid was brutally denied his chance at the American dream remains a mystery. The two INS agents who betrayed him contend that they didn't know he wanted to defect. Even if his desperate head bashing wasn't enough, the woman who translated for Mr. Medvid insists he made his wants clear. In such a sensitive case, contact with superiors was called for — obviously. Congressional sources say that INS officials told them that one of the agents in question was "one of their worst" but that he could not be fired because of Civil Service regulations.

Clearly the Medvid case dictates a hard look by the INS at the quality of its agents and at the thoroughness of their training. Civil Service regulations should not bar the firing of incompetents.

Tragically, once Mr. Medvid had been handed over to Soviet threats and intimidation, the State Department, by then aware of the situation, was limited in its remedies. He was interviewed five times. He was taken ashore to a naval hospital, allowed a night's sleep to alleviate his tension and dull the aftereffects of suspected drugs, and then examined by a physician and psychiatrist.

He insisted on returning to the ship. A Soviet official was always present, but Mr. Medvid appeared competent and could not be held against his will. He signed a statement in Russian that he wanted to leave.

Sen. Jesse Helms' unsuccessful move to have the ship held until there was a third interview may appeal to American heartstrings. But Mr. Medvid's mind appeared made up. His unhappy choice was molded by the INS's original blunder. The knowledge of the fate that awaits him should goad the INS to ensure that such an outrage is not repeated.

Embarrassing the CIA

And then there is the amazing case of top KGB defector Vitaly Sergeyevich Yurchenko, who redefected to the Soviet Union after three months in the hands of the CIA. His lurid press conference last week in the Soviet Embassy in Washington, with its tales of being drugged and held captive by U.S. intelligence agents, is seen as proof by some that he was a plant sent to embarrass America on the eve of the U.S.-Soviet summit meeting.

Maybe so. If that was the case — and it may never be proved — obvious changes in intelligence gathering are necessary to prevent such CIA mortification in the future.

But whether Mr. Yurchenko was a plant or got cold feet, the careless, unprofessional handling of his stay in the United States suggests the CIA badly needs to improve its approach to such sensitive guests.

The CIA seemed anxious to blab to the press the information the Soviet spy was revealing even though he had been promised his defection would be kept secret. Even a private dinner he had with CIA Director William J. Casey was reported in *Newsweek* magazine. Such crowing offers little encouragement to future Soviet defectors who want to stay low-key to shield family members left behind. It also makes inevitable the highly embarrassing publicity now attending the loss of such a highly touted defector.

Experts say Mr. Yurchenko should have been provided with a Russian-speaking "babysitter" during lengthy interrogation sessions, someone with whom he could discuss the depression that usually affects defectors.

Hardest to understand is how such an important, and presumably vulnerable, Soviet spy could have been taken to dine in a crowded Georgetown restaurant with only a young, inexperienced CIA agent for company. (He walked from that last supper back into the arms of the Soviet Embassy.)

Even those who don't read spy novels have heard of Bulgarian agents downing defectors with a thrust from a poisoned umbrella. Had the Soviets been seeking to dispatch Mr. Yurchenko it seems they would have had ample opportunity. If the CIA wants to hold onto defectors in future, it had better boast less and protect more.

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